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Critics recommend alternative funerals. (unethical practices and commercialization in the funeral business spurs Arizona-based Interfaith Funeral Information Committee to offer other suggestions) (includes notes on two books. 'Profits of Death: An Insider Exposes the Death Care Industries,' and 'Caring for the Dead: Your Final Act of Love') (Cover Story)

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Exposes of unethical practices in the funeral industry and critiques of the commercialization of the rites surrounding death have, in recent years, prompted campaigns for more careful regulation of the business and for alternatives in death care.

From the dissemination of wholesale casket prices on the Internet to the publication of a guide on how families can take on many of the tasks of preparing loved ones for burial, initiatives are spreading nationwide to offer consumers choices at the time of their bereavement.

On the consumer advocacy front, the Arizona-based Interfaith Funeral Information Committee provides extensive tools through its Web page (www.xroads.com/~funerals) and hotline to help consumers shop for a funeral and detect questionable marketing tactics.

"This is really a scummy business," said Fr. Henry Wasielewski, who heads the IFIC and has tracked the funeral business for 15 years. "Fifteen years earlier, as a priest, I didn't know I was sending people to some of the worst criminal mortuaries there were."

Wasielewski has ardently campaigned to keep consumers informed about reasonable funeral prices through the committee and in cooperation with memorial societies to conduct surveys exposing high priced establishments (See NCR Feb. 21, 1997 and Sept. 13, 1996).

The recently released *Profits of Death: An Insider Exposes the Death Care Industries* by Darryl J. Roberts, (Five Star Publications, Chandler, ARiz.) provides a detailed account of just what happens surrounding death -- under the skin of the body, behind closed doors at the funeral parlor and among lobbyists in the halls of Congress. Informed by his life in the industry and motivated by a desire to give something back to the consumers who provided him with a comfortable living, Roberts' account is an essential field guide.

"I know from experience that the funeral and cemetery operations -- the death merchants, if you will -- are a potent marketing and political force. They have over the years succeeded in creating an exclusionary business atmosphere in which they strictly limit competition and control pricing," Roberts writes in the prologue.

Service Corporation International, the largest corporate funeral chain, has filed a defamation suit against Roberts and his publishers for allegedly quoting falsely SCI chair and CEO Robert L. Waltrip, causing the company and the executive "shame, embarrassment, humiliation, mental pain and anguish."

Local memorial societies, which first formed in the United States in the 1930s, growing from agricultural burial cooperatives, provide a workable way for consumers to manage funeral arrangements. By twinning with a handful of reasonably priced mortuaries in their area, the funeral and memorial societies assure members services by striking group price agreements with the funeral directors.

Grouped today under the umbrella of the Funeral and Memorial Societies of America, these organizations have become a consumer lobby. For example, FAMSA supported the 1984 Federal Trade Commission "Funeral Rule" requiring mortuaries to give prices over the phone and is presently re-petitioning the FTC to eliminate non-declinable professional fees for funeral services. This fee,

according to Lisa Carlson, FAMSA executive director, "is the one thing that consumers have no choice over."

She said the non-declinable fees, a "cover charge" issued before any specific services are added to a bill, rose 71 percent during the first six years they went into effect, from 1981-1987.

The average industry non-declinable fee today is \$1025, Carlson said, with corporate-owned mortuaries ranging 20 to 90 percent higher. "Stewart's (average) is \$1995," Carlson said.

FAMSA, the only nonprofit educational organization in the country monitoring the funeral industry full-time for consumers, publishes a monthly newsletter "dedicated to a consumer's right to choose a meaningful, affordable funeral."

Carlson herself made the national media in the early 1980s by opting out of a commercial funeral and burial when her husband died. "I had almost no money in the bank, so I drove his body with a friend to the crematorium. I planned an open house gathering and I buried his remains in the spring," Carlson said. "If I had had money, I would have given away what turned out to be a very meaningful experience."

When Carlson's mother-in-law died of AIDS in 1986, her entire family handled the mortuary, funeral and cemetery tasks. "My sons built the box, and we drove to a country family property and spent the afternoon and evening digging the grave by hand," Carlson said. The following weekend, a graveside memorial service celebrating the life of this former college professor drew a large crowd. "Almost no one there knew anyone else. There were stories and music and planting flowers. There was no set ritual. It was totally spontaneous," she said.

Those experiences prompted Carlson's book, *Caring for The Dead: Your Final Act of Love*, which will soon come out in a second edition. The book is packed with legal and practical details to help individuals, families and communities deepen the experience of the death of a loved one by handling funeral arrangements on their own.

"Caring for our own dead is at the other end of the spectrum from natural childbirth. It's a logical extension of hospice," Carlson said. "We've allowed the medical profession to medicalize what is a natural experience at birth just as we've allowed the funeral industry to commercialize a natural experience at death. By doing so, they have diminished lots of opportunities to personalize the rituals."

Carlson said taking care of physical arrangements, from preparing a body, to building a coffin, "takes away the sense of helplessness. ... I cannot tell you how therapeutic it is to have something physical to do, and in the process of having something physical to do, there is a natural conduit for grief and love."

High on her list of alternatives to conventional death care is the creation of funeral committees in congregations, a task to which she devotes an entire chapter. The lay-run funeral committee offers an interesting alternative or complement to services provided by commercial, for-profit mortuaries. And, Carlson notes, "Catholic liturgy specifically provides for church and family involvement."

Many dioceses have created bereavement training programs for parishes -- in fact, the Los Angeles archdiocese boasts one of the best programs in the country.

Some clergy and laity are advocating bringing wakes and viewing back into the churches under the coordination of a funeral committee, an option that also has occurred in some parishes. Supporters of this kind of ministry say it saves money, strengthens community, offers a natural support system to the grieving and provides an important opportunity for evangelization.

Such ministry "would restore the faith to funerals. It would put the emphasis on the spiritual. The simplicity of faith would more than compensate for a large display and a larger bill, which most people cannot afford," wrote Fr. William Bausch in an October 1976 issue of Today's Catholic.

Bausch, now retired, was pastor of St. Mary's Church in

Colts Neck, N.J., and developed a model grieving ministry at the parish.

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